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The CIA's Future in an Open Society

Admiral Stansfield Turner, now the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, finished at the top of his class at Annapolis a few years ago.

He was an athlete as well as a bright student, a combination especially appealing to the Rhodes Scholarship committees, and indeed Turner studied in England after graduation as a Rhodes scholar. One of his less happy athletic experiences came in Atlanta in fact, said Turner on a visit the other day, when he was part of a Navy football team favored to whip Georgia Tech by three touchdowns; Tech won that day by two points.

Turner got to Atlanta on one other occasion, back in 1974, when an old Annapolis classmate of his from Plains told him that he was going to run for President of the United States. That same classmate, one James Earl Carter, tapped Turner at the beginning of the year as the new director of the beleaguered CIA. Turner's Navy record was an impressive one, and he was quickly confirmed by the Senate.

The new CIA head does not quite like the "Intelligence Czar" title sometimes used to refer to him, but that title is pretty close to being accurate. Since naming him as CIA director, President Carter has given Turner additional authority to oversee the budgets of other intelligence-gathering agencies and also a general responsibility to make sure there is not too much overlapping in such operations.

But Turner, in objecting to that Czar title, emphasizes what he views the need for a healthy "competition" among the various intelligence agencies. Maybe the same information could be available in a general way to different agencies, in his opinion, and yet the Pentagon experts and the CIA might analyze and evaluate information in different ways.

Turner, of course, took over the CIA at a hard time, a time when some of that agency's previous actions were under severe criticism and when in a general way many people were already concerned about the proper role of su

The questions worry him still, after his first eight months in a tough assignment. Turner is persuaded, he says, that the intelligence apparatus of a country can not serve that country well unless it both understands and is attuned to the values and ethics of the country. But then a question, "When does the need for good information outweigh the desire to have American values reflected in all that we do?".

Turner himself is not certain of all the answers and says so. One of the great problems is quite simply that the values applied in judgment of any intelligence action change over time; the standards applied, say, in 1987 or 1997 may be quite different from the standards considered proper right now. Another problem is secrecy. By definition, most intelligence operations are secret. This means it is not usually possible to float a trial balloon, as it is in most government operations, and get some public reaction.

But there clearly are precise CIA guidelines today that did not exist a few years ago. For one, a specific directive from the President forbids the CIA from participating in or planning the assassination of anybody, anytime, anyplace. For another, the President himself must authorize any action that could be considered "covert," designed not just to gather information but to influence events in another country.

There are also special Senate and House intelligence committees which oversee CIA operations in a real way these days, something not true even a year or so ago.

Admiral Turner is impressive. He seems tough-minded enough to press for the kind of intelligence needed to provide for American national security on whatever front. He also seems attuned to the values of this nation in the best sense, aware that the values and ethics and morals of an open society must ultimately be applied in judgment to what the CIA or any other governmental agency undertakes. That's a strong combination.

Footnote: Turner's speech in Atlanta marked the kickoff of a new group, the Atlanta City Forum, whose aim is to bring a distinguished national speaker to a breakfast meeting